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Call Authentication NOI Seen as Prod to Telco Movement on IP Network Robocalls

The FCC, by putting a call authentication framework notice of inquiry on Thursday's agenda (see 1706220050), may be signaling to the telco industry that if it doesn't move faster on voluntary solutions to robocalls over IP networks, the agency will step in with regulatory ones, iconectiv Chief Technology Officer Chris Drake told us. The industry wants a voluntary system, with the FCC consulted "but not running it," he said. The FCC, knowing that, is signaling "there will be regulation if nothing happens," said Drake, a board member of the Alliance for Telecommunications Industry Solutions (ATIS).

ATIS, along with SIP Forum, the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) and others, came up with the protocols and framework that are the subject of the NOI and are aimed at validating calls and mitigating spoofing. In the NOI, the FCC asks a variety of policy-centric questions about the Signature-based Handling of Asserted Information Using Tokens (Shaken) framework for making an authenticated phone call and the governance model for entities to be able to vouch for call authenticity.

The FCC said a third step, the call validation display framework -- which would determine how the Shaken information and Secure Telephone Identity Revisited (Stir) protocols developed by IETF would be displayed to consumers -- still is being developed by ATIS and SIP Forum and thus isn't part of the NOI. ATIS told us it expects that in Q4 it will release guidelines for a display framework intended to be technology agnostic and that would serve as the basis for technology-specific recommendations developed by such groups as CableLabs and GSMA. ATIS said it "supports the view espoused by the FCC in its NOI that STIR/SHAKEN is an important tool to mitigate robocalling." It also said it "believes the FCC is asking the right questions in order to establish the root of trust -- i.e., the governance authority for STIR/SHAKEN."

The NOI doesn't say outright that the FCC is willing to let the industry drive the issue, but some questions asked lend themselves to carrier and industry responses on a voluntary, industry-coordinated solution rather than regulation, Drake said. In the NOI, for example, the FCC asks what, "if anything," it should do to promote adoption and implementation of authentication frameworks like Shaken-Stir or whether it should require their adoption.

"I'm less concerned with the specific solution [and more] with making sure whatever the FCC moves forward on actually makes a dent in the problem," said National Consumers League Vice President-Public Policy Telecommunications and Fraud John Breyault. "Consumers are inundated every day by these calls." He said proposed authentication systems before the FCC need "robust testing to make sure they work" before they're actually put in place. He also said there needs to be consideration given to groups that might have legitimate commercial or public safety reasons for things like caller ID spoofing. He said if the FCC moves forward, one challenge could be rivalries among different proposed call authentication systems. "Certainly the FCC is going to have a challenge navigating whatever friction there might be" among solutions, Breyault said.

The agency teed up several items in recent months on robocall regulation, including a separate reassigned numbers database NOI that's also on Thursday's agenda (see 1706300005). Agency watchers said there's still a question of how far Chairman Ajit Pai will follow -- and deviate from -- goals former Chairman Tom Wheeler set in October when Wheeler criticized the initial findings of the industry-led Robocall Task Force (see 1610260053). "It was a road map for what more needs to be done, to start addressing this problem," Breyault said.

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